

**SECOND EDITION**

# **Improving Schools Through Action Research**

**A Comprehensive Guide  
for Educators**

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2006, 2009

in finding two books—Daniels (2002a) and Day et al. (2002)—and just a handful of articles that are only peripherally related to the direction of his action research study. This, however, is a normal part of the literature review process. Searches must be limited and expanded depending on whether too few or too many sources are found. The next thing for Jack to do is complete another search using different search terms. Articles on literature circles may be helpful, and Jack might also want to expand his search using the keyword descriptor *increasing reading engagement*. When more matching sources are found, each article should be skimmed and the most relevant sources should be kept. Then a more in-depth reading of each article should occur to determine whether to keep the source or throw it out. In addition, reference lists in the articles should be scanned to determine if relevant titles are included. If potential sources are found this way, the articles or books must be obtained and read to determine whether they are good literature review sources.

### Evaluating Literature

In choosing sources for the literature review, an initial evaluation is made regarding the relevance of the source for informing the action research study. However, once sources are chosen, they must be further evaluated to determine the ways in which the reviewed information can be used to guide the action research process. Questions to ask in evaluating the literature include the following:

- **Relevance:** Does the source provide information that can help inform my action research study? For example, does it provide information about ways to structure the intervention or innovation I am interested in trying? Does it provide conclusions made by other researchers on the intervention I want to implement? What can I learn from the source that can help me in the planning of my action research study?
- **Credibility:** Does the source seem credible? If the source is not a research study, are the claims and/or suggestions made by the author based on his or her extensive experience? If the source is a research study, are the results of the study supported by data and do the research methods seem sound?
- **Similarity:** Is information in the source based on the study of a setting that is similar to mine? Is it based on the study of participants (teachers, students, etc.) who are similar to the participants who will be in my study?

### Synthesizing Literature

Once sources have been chosen based on their relevance, credibility, and similarity to the action research study being planned, the next step is to synthesize information. Synthesizing involves connecting information into a coherent, integrated whole, and this process cannot occur until all relevant sources have been thoroughly read. In reading sources, common themes or topics typically emerge, and it is around these topics that a synthesized literature review is written. One common mistake in writing a literature review is to organize the review by sources, which results in a review that is simply a list of the information from each source. Instead of organizing by sources, the review should be organized by topic.

In Jack's case, several topics may emerge as he reads his sources, such as ways to structure reading clubs, the reading/writing connection, ways that students talk about books

## ACTIVITY 3.1

### Reviewing the Literature

Follow the steps for searching for literature to review, choosing sources, determining topics and subtopics, and organizing and writing the literature review:

1. Use online databases such as the library catalog (to search for books) and ERIC, ProQuest, and/or EBSCOhost (to search for articles, conference papers, etc.) to search for sources related to the research topic identified in Activity 2.2. Use keyword descriptors in your search. Acquire books, articles, and other sources found in your search.
2. Skim sources and keep those that are most relevant to your study. Next, carefully read each source and determine the relevancy of each. Keep the most relevant sources.
3. If necessary, expand the search to acquire more sources. Search using new keyword descriptors and acquire sources from the reference lists of the articles, books, and other previously acquired literature.
4. Read all sources and keep those that are the most relevant, credible, and similar to the study you are planning. Once sources are chosen, carefully reread each, making notes on the topics discussed in each reference.
5. Generate a list of topics that emerged from the literature. Create an organized, structured outline of these topics and add subtopics. Next to each subtopic, list sources in which the subtopic is discussed.



**Research Paper Activity:** Use your outline to write a draft literature review. Be sure to follow APA guidelines (see Chapter 8). Synthesize so information is provided on each topic/subtopic. Be sure multiple references/sources are described for each topic or subtopic. Use transitional sentences or phrases in your writing to connect ideas. Use a heading for the literature review such as *Literature Review*, *Review of Literature*, *Connection to Best Practices*, or another appropriate heading. Place the literature review after the reflection written in Activity 2.2.

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